

WET N' WILD AT FAIRCHILD

story and photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

After completing a one-minute buoyancy test, underwater swim and egress familiarization training, five students (above) approach the Modular Egress Training System for the first of four dunks. To maintain the 1:2 instructor-to-student ratio, three instructors accompany them. A water survival instructor (right) shows Airman 1st Class Jonathan Butler (blue helmet) and fellow students, techniques they need to work on for their next three dunks. A water survival instructor (background courtesy photo) observes a student making his way out of the training system. The METS is the first of its kind in the Department of Defense and can be configured to mirror all helicopter platforms and the rollover that occurs after crashing in water.



It's every helicopter aircrew's worst nightmare. A routine sortie over open water suddenly becomes an in-flight emergency. Now, you're being yelled at to brace for a hard landing and an underwater egress as the chopper begins a corkscrew-shaped spiral towards the big blue ball.

Fear hangs in the air like a kite over a power line. Everything that is happening is out of your control. For the next 60 seconds, **your thoughts and actions will mean the difference between life and death.** As fast as you can after the impact, you take a final gulp of air and hope you remember what you learned in class earlier that morning. And, if your memory fails you, at least there are five divers swimming nearby to see that you make it to softball practice later that night.

This scenario is not the latest episode of Fear Factor, it's the Air Force's SV84 Helicop-

ter Underwater Egress Course at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.

"It's hard to instill a positive mental attitude under adverse conditions," said Tech. Sgt. William Shirley, Water Survival Flight chief, of the one-day course. "Due to feedback from crash survivors and field research, we've determined that our training increases the [aircrew] water crash survivability rate by 60 percent."

Using a team of nine Survival Evasion Resistance Escape instructors, a pool and a crane-hoisted simulator called the Modular Egress Training System — the first of its kind in the Department of Defense — between 800 and 1,000 Air Force and Coast Guard aircrew members are trained each year.

Remaining cool as a cucumber throughout the entire class, Airman 1st Class Jonathan Butler of Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., said there

were no surprises because peers who graduated ahead of him had briefed him on the details of the course.

"I knew that if I just kept calm, listened to what the instructors had to say and remembered my reference point for the exit that everything would be O.K."

The combat control student mentally prepared himself for the last of his four dunks — performed blindfolded — by closing his eyes during the first three.

Another benefit to his strategy: **"By keeping your eyes closed, you don't notice other people panicking,"** he said.

Sergeant Shirley said panic is not uncommon for new students. "If someone says to you 'We're going to crash this helicopter.' The first thought that naturally comes to mind is, **'I'm going to die!'** But if you've been through our training — your response will be different." 🦅

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